'Like Paris, Kolhapur was the cradle of culture'

ROOTS

BHANU ATHAIYA

IF Paris was called the centre of arts, Kolhapur wasn't too far behind.

I grew up in Kolhapur in what was called a wada, a rambling structure with more than 30 rooms, three courtyards, a well and family temple, and a huge joint family. The environment in the house was one of learning and scholasticism. Not just my house, the whole town had a similar approach. It is not for nothing that Kolhapur is called the Benares of the South.

My family was the Rajopadhya family, and as the name suggests, we trace our roots to the days when our forefathers were priests of royalty. According to historical research, the connection goes back to the pre-Sultanate times when Maharana Laxman Singh was the ruler of Chittor.

The maharana, whose kingdom was in threat of being attacked, had a dream instructing him to go to Benares to look for a learned Maharashtrian priest. He followed the dream and found Mudgalacharya, who was holding a yagna for Sant Dyaneshwar of Maharashtra. Mudgalacharya advised Laxman Singh to attack the enemy on a particular day at a particular time. He did so and was victorious, so he returned to Benares and asked if a permanent relationship between the acharya and the royal household could be set up. This relationship continued upto the 20th century.

Since ours was a priestly home, every ritual was performed with utmost perfection. The chanting of mantras continued all day, and as children we were familiar with all the mythological tales. During festivals, the potters attached to the family brought figurines—nagas on Naagpanchami and Krishna on Gokul Ashtami—and we learnt our mythology this way. On the eve of Dusherra was Gondhal, when stories were enacted to the beat of drums by the Gondhali or storyteller.

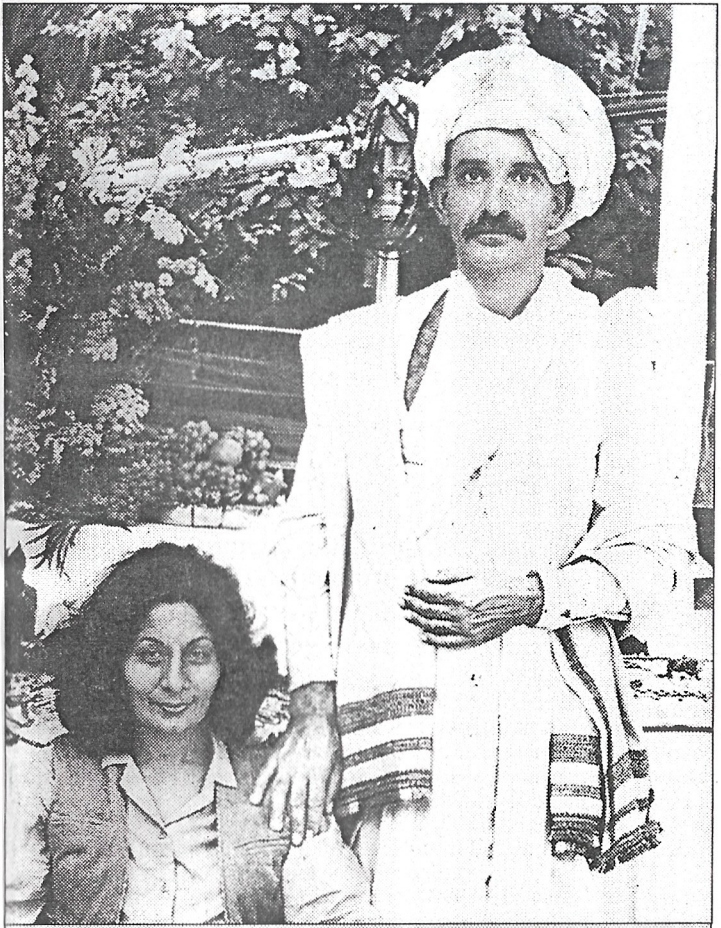
I was lucky to have grown up in Kolhapur's golden era when the arts were so encouraged. So many famous writers came from here—N. S. Phadke, V. S. Khandekar, Vijay Tendulkar. The whole place was charged with creativity. Great artistes like Kesarbai Kerkar, Mallikarjun Mansoor and Gangubai Hangal were names we were all familiar with. Lata Mangeshkar was discovered in Kolhapur. There was a place called Deval Club where the great singers wanted to perform before connoisseurs. And, just like in Paris, where you find painters putting up their easels on the river bank, so too in Kolhapur artistes sketched by the river. Instead of the Seine we had the Panchganga.

Even cinema received great patronage, Shalini Cinetone was built to give cinema a boost, and Baburao Painter produced films from the early 1900s. Actors like Bal Gandharva were invited to perform, and Hollywood films were screened—I've watched Greta Garbo's *Queen Christina* sitting on my father's lap. My father was artistic too. He used to paint in the British academic style, he cultivated roses, pursued photography and even taught my mother to embroider. I think I have inherited my artistic bent from him—in fact, I started my career with embroidery.

When I came to Bombay as a young girl, I stayed with theatre director Hima Devi, who I had met at Kolhapur. I consider her my fairy godmother and still design the costumes for her plays. In November, we are putting up *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

After graduating from the J.J. School of Art, I started taking embroidery orders and that's how Nargis noticed me. She took me to meet Raj Kapoor, and before I knew it, I was designing for Hindi films. My first film was *Shree 420.* Subsequently, I also worked in many other RK films including *Satyam Shivam Sundaram, Henna* and *Sangam.* My sketch book still has the drawings of Vyjayanthimala's dress in which she sang, *"Kya karu Ram mujhe buddha mil gaya."*

Soon other directors began approaching me—Guru Dutt, for one. What a pleasure it was working with a man like him on films like *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* and



A CUT ABOVE: Bhanu Athaiya, grande dame of the costume designing world of Bollywood, with Ben Kingsley as Gandhi

Saheb Bibi Aur Gulam. Fo instance, in order to get a reall authentic picture of Bengal fo *Saheb Bibi*, he actually sent me t Calcutta for research.

I also remember hov impressed I was when I first me Meena Kumari. The sheer aur around her, the intensity...whe you were in her presence, nothin else mattered. You just go sucked into her orbit. I als designed for Helen– yes, al those feathers and tinsel.

People have often asked m to list my favourite film. There are so many, but I would choos *Saheb Bibi Aur Gulam Ambedkar, Dhyaasparva, Lekin Lagaan* and *Gandhi*. Why? Because all these film had a strong story—they're not jus song-and-dance sequences.

Kolhapur has changed terribly now. The sugar barons have take over and the arts have taken a back seat. But after I won th Oscar for *Gandhi*, the Kolhapur Municipal Corporation held a grand reception for me at th Palace Theatre. The whole town was so proud and so was I. I wor the same blue sari and silver jew ellery that I had worn for th Oscar ceremony. After all Kolhapur was my cradle of cul ture."

(As told to **Nina Martyris***)*

(This is part of a series where well-known personalities trace their roots)